

REFUGE: COWS leaders visited Malheur refuge

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and prevent any further escalation of anything, I think we all agree we should take those opportunities.”

Oregon Republican State Rep. Dallas Heard also attended the meeting; however, he says he is not a member of COWS.

The 90-minute conversation was recorded by participants at the Jan. 9 meeting and given to OPB.

On the recording, Harney County Judge Steve Grasty thanks the group for their concern, but asks them to stay away from the refuge. Grasty said the militants were showing signs of fatigue and defeat, and worried that a visit from lawmakers would reinvigorate Ammon Bundy and the rest of the occupiers.

“If we’re getting close (to a resolution), and you embolden Bundy by your presence, and this runs on for weeks and months, it will be awful in this community,” Grasty said.

The FBI agent also asked the lawmakers not to visit the refuge.

Those pleas fell on deaf ears. And Grasty’s prediction came true.

COWS representatives visited the refuge, which was closed to the public. The lawmakers acknowledge they fed the militants information gathered from that meeting, and militant leaders talked openly about what they learned from those disclosures.

“These lawmakers have shown great courage to support us,” said Robert “LaVoy” Finicum, who would later die after being shot by state police. “Much more than others who refused to come and look us in the eye.”

The visit was the latest step in an ongoing and organized campaign by these lawmakers, essentially the political arm of the militant movement, to make a once-radical political cause part of the mainstream.

Bunkerville beginnings

Matt Shea is no stranger to armed confrontations: In April 2014, the lawmaker — who has sponsored legislation to split Washington into two states — traveled from Spokane Valley to Bunkerville, Nevada, to support Cliven Bundy’s armed standoff with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The federal government began impounding Bundy’s cattle after he failed to pay for decades of grazing leases. Bundy responded with an armed faceoff against federal agents that attracted international media attention and hundreds of new followers to his cause.

“This is a war on rural America,” Shea said in one video from Bunkerville.

In Nevada, Shea met other state and local elected officials who had also come to support Bundy, including Fiore and Greenlee County, Arizona, Commissioner Robert Corbell. “I met Matt at the Bundy ranch,” Corbell said in an interview. “And we’re talking state sovereignty and all that, and we said, ‘We’re all elected officials. Why not try and get some laws changed?’ So, we went to the casino at the state line, and in the motel room there ... we created COWS.”

The explicit purpose of



AP file photo

Nevada Assemblywoman Michelle Fiore, R-Las Vegas, spoke on Feb. 10 to the four occupiers of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge.

the Coalition of Western States, according to the group’s website, is to “restore management of public lands to the States where it Constitutionally belongs.” While the organization claims to have more than “50 legislators and grass roots leaders predominately in the Western United States,” leaders would not release a roster of members, meeting agendas, meeting notes or tax filing status.

Corbell told OPB that coalition leadership knew Ammon Bundy planned to take over U.S. government property in Harney County before it happened, but were unsure which federal outpost it would be. The federal government owns about 75 percent of the land in Harney County.

“We knew he was going to do something,” Corbell said, “because something had to be done.”

In October 2015, COWS began posting to social media about the resentencing of Dwight and Stephen Hammond. In a Dec. 11 press release, the coalition accused the federal government of engaging in “a literal, international conspiracy to deprive” ranchers and farmers of their property rights in Harney County and throughout the West.

Finding facts

The audio recording of the Jan. 9 “fact-finding” meeting between COWS and Harney County officials shows that Shea, Fiore and at least five other state lawmakers attempted to negotiate on behalf of the militants.

The recording captures a tense conversation that begins under the auspices of peaceful resolution and ends with calls by COWS members to take action.

Early in the meeting State Rep. Judy Boyle, a Republican from Midvale, Idaho, suggested that the group had a unique role to play as intermediaries between law enforcement and the militants.

“We know they’re outsiders, and we’re outsiders, so maybe we can get through to them,” Boyle said. “They did an act of civil disobedience, but they took it way too far. Much too far.”

The lawmakers wanted information from law enforcement, including what tactics the FBI anticipated taking against the militants. They wondered aloud, for example, whether refuge power would be cut. Law enforcement personnel repeatedly declined answering. The lawmakers continued to ask.

They also wanted to know what criminal charges the occupiers might face. After getting nowhere with that line of inquiry, coalition members asked with whom they could negotiate on behalf of the Ammon Bundy-led militants.

“There is no negotiation,” said Marion County Sheriff Jason Myers, one of the local law enforcement officers at the meeting. “Just go home. We’re not going to negotiate because we just want them to leave this community.”

“The issue that causes concern is not entirely just the occupation of that facility, it’s the other people this has brought into our community,” said Harney County Deputy Sheriff Brian Needham. “There have been many threats made. There are people in the community that are dangerous people.”

Finally, over the phone, Fiore tried to turn the meeting into a call to action.

“The BLM has become a bureaucratic agency of — basically — terrorism,” she said. “So at what point do we band together as elected officials, and say, ‘Enough is enough of the BLM? Can we divert this conversation? At what point are we going to actually do something for our citizens?’”

Judge Steve Grasty, the leading elected official in Harney County, dismissed that notion out of hand and asked Fiore and others not to call federal officers “terrorists.”

The end of the occupation

At first, Michele Fiore had no interest in playing the role of negotiator.

In a Jan. 30 interview, the Nevada assemblywoman repeatedly expressed anger and frustration that Ammon Bundy was being held without bond.

She cursed the federal magistrate judge who denied Bundy’s bail request due to the ongoing occupation. She was also angry that the last four holdouts on the refuge refused to surrender despite pleas from Bundy to do so.

“Can you please write a story that these people aren’t us?” Fiore asked. “This wasn’t the plan. It wasn’t supposed to go down like this. They weren’t at the Bundy ranch. Nobody knows who these people are.”

The next evening, Fiore said she and her allies would take a new approach with the final four.

Over the 10 next days, Fiore and fellow Coalition of Western States members KrisAnne Hall and Gavin Seim reached out to the remaining occupiers by phone and electronic messages. Hall is a self-described Constitutional scholar. Seim is a former Washington Congressional candidate who serves as COWS’ social media coordinator.

“We stayed in contact with them pretty much during that entire time, minus a few days when the phones were cut,” Fiore said.

And when the FBI finally began to close the perimeter on the militants, holdout David Fry called Fiore. She couldn’t take the call because she was already on a plane headed to Portland.

After the failed attempt, Fry called Seim, who streamed their conversation online. At the peak, more than 75,000 people were listening. They heard Fry, along with husband and wife militants Sean and Sandy Anderson, scream and invoke Finicum’s death as a reason not to surrender.

“I declare war against the federal government,” Fry said at one point. “There’s no way to beat this anymore. Liberty or death.”

Ultimately, Fiore helped de-escalate the situation, in part by leading the group in prayer over the phone. Fiore and Seim talked to the militants for more than four hours straight.

In the end, Fry and the others gave themselves up after several tense exchanges. Fiore traveled with the FBI agents who met the four militants as they surrendered.

Fiore confirmed to OPB that she traveled to Oregon as part of the COWS contingent. Hall did not return numerous requests for comment. Seim responded to OPB’s request for comment in an email.

“My role was not representing COWS in particular,” he wrote. “That said, legislators and members of COWS were each taking individual action to assure safe passage and to reveal the truth of what the FBI was doing in Oregon. Members of COWS worked hard in front of and behind the scenes and good work was done.”

Fiore, who is running for Congress, has attended several of the militants’ pre-trial hearings in the downtown Portland federal courthouse. She’s spoken to the press on behalf of the occupiers afterward. She’s come back to Oregon, she said, in part to ensure that defendants in charges related to the standoff at Cliven Bundy’s Nevada ranch are treated fairly.

“Basically, I’m here to meet with the detainees on an official capacity ... from Nevada,” Fiore said March 11 after a pre-trial hearing for Pete Santilli, an Internet radio host charged in both Oregon and Nevada. “Also, as a representative of Nevada, I would urge all our Nevada attorneys to seek trial outside of Nevada, because I do not think they will get a fair trial in Nevada.”

Meanwhile, the arrest of the militants appears to be strengthening the Coalition of Western States, or at least helping its cause. Although she wouldn’t provide names, Fiore said the coalition has new members, including from the East Coast.

The GOP-controlled Congress is also considering legislation that would remove the Bureau of Land Management’s ability to enforce the law.

“We are not going away,” Fiore said. “We are dug in, and we will fight until this tyranny is defeated.”



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Gov. Kate Brown, right, talks with Chairman of the Agriculture Department Preston Winn, left, and BMCC President Cam Preus about the agriculture school on Wednesday at the BMCC campus in Pendleton.

BROWN: Travels to Bend Thursday, Eugene Friday

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own. Native American kindergarten students are also showing signs of improvement and outperforming their state counterparts.

The district has poured resources and effort into bolstering its American Indian curriculum, including a Umatilla language class for kindergartners.

Brown was particularly mesmerized by Wednesday’s lesson, which was centered around First Foods — the traditional diet of local tribes.

“I could’ve stayed in that classroom forever,” Brown later told Pendleton Mayor Phillip Houk.

Brown praised the Pendleton Early Learning Center for exemplifying the “cradle to career” model of education she wants to promote.

Brown ended her tour of the facility by signing House Bill 4037, which creates new incentives for solar energy.

With the early learning center’s roof-top solar array as a backdrop, Brown said Oregon is already experiencing the effects of climate change through forest fires, fish deaths and less snow pack.

“The sun and the land

“There will be benefits to the state in the form of jobs on solar sites and property tax revenue for local governments.”

— Gov. Kate Brown

will be used to create jobs in Oregon and economic investment in areas that need development,” she said. “There will be benefits to the state in the form of jobs on solar sites and property tax revenue for local governments.”

After visiting the early learning center, Gov. Brown toured the precision irrigation program at Blue Mountain Community College, stopped downtown to talk business with boot-maker Richard Stapleman and visited the *East Oregonian* editorial board. Brown travels to Bend Thursday and finishes her three-day tour of Oregon on Friday in Eugene.

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